



Howard County Schools 2003 Tabletop Exercise Howard County, Maryland

Summary: Howard County, Maryland, is located far enough away from Washington, D.C., to avoid a direct impact in the event of a major terrorist attack in DC, but close enough to be affected in a myriad of ways. This January 31, 2003, exercise was designed to practice and evaluate the Howard County Public School System's emergency response procedures for such an "indirect" emergency.

Exercise Overview

- **Participants:** Howard County Public School System; an elementary, middle school and high school; and the Howard County Community Emergency Response Network (CERN).
Sponsor: The Horizon Foundation.
- **Purpose:** To provide a realistic experience dealing with a large-scale emergency and to evaluate emergency plans and organizational structures.
- **Scenario:** An 8 a.m. explosion in the lower-level of Washington, D.C.'s main railroad station destroys the rear of the building and seven-story parking deck, killing several thousand people and causing injuries for a three-block radius.
- **In Howard County:** Schools begin reporting that parents are arriving to get their children. High school students want to leave using their own cars.
- **Three Hours Later:** The DC Mayor announces the incident involved a nuclear explosion; only emergency responders are allowed in and out of the District.
- **Three Hours Later:** Bus drivers want to know whether or not to take the children home. **Issues:** Is there anyone at home to care for the children? How will they provide for the students at the school for possibly extended periods of time?

Lessons Learned

- The school system needs survivable radio communications to supplement cell and landline phones.
- The school system should decentralize decisions in emergencies to allow maximum flexibility at the school level.
- Terrorist-related contingencies should be incorporated into system-wide and local school emergency plans.
- Schools should work with parents to identify people to whom their children may be released in the event of an emergency and to ensure students have necessary medication available if there is an emergency event.
- Media monitoring should be included as a standard operating procedure for all schools so personnel can handle rumor control.
- Decisions to cancel school or institute early dismissal need to be made as soon as possible because of the time required to coordinate planning and actions.
- School emergency plans should address the possible need for emergency food supplies and access to freezers and food stores, especially if the school does not have a food preparation capability.

Questions? Comments? Suggestions? Have you recently conducted a local or state exercise that you believe may be of interest to others in the emergency management community? Send an e-mail to SmartPractices@fema.gov